

Oxford Book of American Poetry Review by Dan Coffey

It is a curious task, reviewing an anthology of poems; one is unsure whether to shine the critical spotlight on the selector and/or editor, the publisher who presumably decided upon the scope of the anthology before bringing in said selector/editor, or the poets/poems themselves. This reviewer decided early on in this process to leave, for the most part, the poets and poems alone. Whether they have earned, through their work, the right to be anthologized is a valid question, but to focus on the merits of each poem and each poet is to stray from reviewing the anthology as a work in itself; a cultural and aesthetic statement. The question to be asked is whether the anthology succeeds in representing the best work of an era, a style, a nationality/ethnicity, or another, narrower, criterion (poems dealing with war, erotic poems, or environmentally conscious poems, for instance).

With 2006's *Oxford Book of American Poetry*, Oxford University Press has taken it upon itself to make a rather grand cultural and aesthetic statement: presenting, in a single volume, the best, most representative American poems. This isn't its first attempt. Oxford University Press published such a stock-taking in 1927, titled *The Oxford Book of American Verse*. The editor and selector for this first edition was Bliss Carman, considered during his time to be Canada's leading poet, and crowned Poet Laureate of Canada in 1928, a year before his death.

Oxford University Press published two more editions of this anthology before the present one. F. O. Matthiessen was the selector and editor for the 1950 edition. In addition to being American, Matthiessen was a literary critic, not a poet. He was, in fact, one of the foremost critics of his time, and wrote groundbreaking critical studies of Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, and T. S. Eliot. In 1976, a new edition was published, retitled *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*, and Richard Ellmann was the anthologist this time. A literary biographer as well as critic, the majority of his writing was concerned with the works of James Joyce; he also wrote a highly praised study of Yeats, and how he was influenced by Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Auden. Ellmann's biography of Wilde won him a Pulitzer just before his death in 1987.

THE OXFORD BOOK OF AMERICAN POETRY

Chosen and Edited by David Lehman

Book Description

Edited by one of the most recognized and respected contemporary poets and anthologists, The Oxford Book of American Poetry is a comprehensive, one-volume collection of American poetry from its seventeenth-century origins to the present. Comprised of over two-hundred poets, from Whitman to Plath, Lowell to Ginsberg, this anthology contains the best writing in the field and establishes a standard wider and more inclusive than any other of its kind. Arranged chronologically, this compilation encompasses major currents of American poetry, all the while focusing the reader's attention on the important figures. With biographical headnotes and contemporary and relevant poets, The Oxford Book of American Poetry is a rich collection that provides essential material for readers for years to come.

From an accomplished Canadian poet, to a literary critic predominantly interested in novelists, to a literary critic whose main focus was British and Irish writers, we now have David Lehman, the next in the line of anthologists chosen by Oxford to present the best of the whole of American poetry. In choosing Lehman, Oxford has turned another corner. Lehman is very much a poet. He is also a tremendous popularizer of poetry, having been the series editor of the annually published *The Best American Poetry* since its inception in 1988, and editing two other anthologies. He is involved with the publishing of literary criticism (he edited books of essays on John Ashbery and James Merrill), but to date has only *written* one book that can be considered literary criticism: *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*.

For a fan of poetry that chooses not to recognize, or at least not to dwell on, the line between “popular” and “academic” poetry, rejoicing should be in order at the publication of this Lehmanized edition of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (“Poetry,” now, not “Verse”). In his preface, Lehman praises the past two iterations of this project and claims to have used Matthiessen’s and Ellmann’s selections as raw material which he largely chose to build on rather than replace. The requisite apologies are made for poets, new and old, left out, and for comparative thinness in the amount of space given to some poets over others. Such is the nature of anthologies that these apologies are both necessary and carry little weight. Even without the ever-present “canon wars,” scholars and poetry lovers are bound to be distressed at some point during a thorough leafing-through of any anthology, much less one of this scope. Still, some omissions do seem ill-considered; in this instance, the exclusion of Anne Waldman and Susan Howe. Notwithstanding her own considerable merits as a poet, Waldman is inextricable from the poetic careers of many of her contemporaries, and, like Lehman himself, has done almost as much work promoting other poets in the service of building up poetry as a popular art form as she has composing her own poetry. Howe’s exclusion trumps Waldman’s in terms of irony: if anyone can be said to be a proponent for American poetry as a living organism, it is she. Susan Howe has taken silenced and forgotten figures from early American history and built critically acclaimed poems around them, imagining their voices and letting those voices put the words on the page. Any anthology of American poetry without Howe’s work is diminished.

It seems almost absurd to try to capture over three hundred years of poetry in one volume, and also significant that the publisher tackling this project is British. Britain has, as they say, “been around,” and can take the long view much more easily than America itself, which is embroiled in the midst of producing its own literature. American publishers that regularly compile literary anthologies, like Norton and Longman, have published collections of American poetry that can be contained in specific time-periods (*The Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, *Postmodern American Poetry: a Norton Anthology*). The one anthology that gives the Oxford a run for its money is the Rutgers University Press’ *New Anthology of American Poetry*, which is published in two volumes. It predates the coverage of the former with its inclusion of Pre-Columbian writing, but doesn’t extend as far as the Oxford, which has 1950 as its cut-off birthdate for inclusion. Lehman is stricter with the Oxford anthology, eschewing, as much as makes sense, songs that don’t conform to standard definitions of poetry and poetries that aren’t in English. One can see Lehman’s point regarding songs, but the practice of excluding non-English language poetry isn’t adequately justified by Lehman in his prefatory note, and, indeed, the lack of it is a notable loss.



DAVID LEHMAN was born in New York City in 1948. He is the author of six books of poems, most recently **When a Woman Loves a Man** (Scribner, 2005). Among his nonfiction books are **The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets** (Anchor, 1999) and **The Perfect Murder** (Michigan, 2000). He edited **Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present**, which appeared from Scribner in 2003. He teaches writing and literature in the graduate writing program of the New School in New York City and offers an undergraduate course each fall on “Great Poems” at New York University. He is the editor of a new edition of **The Oxford Book of American Poetry**, a one-volume comprehensive anthology of poems from Anne Bradstreet to the present. He initiated **The Best American Poetry** series in 1988 and received a Guggenheim Fellowship a year later. He lives in New York City and in Ithaca, New York.

One of Lehman's main themes in his preface is a tough one to swallow on its face – the idea that history runs in both directions, and that poets can influence the careers of other poets who have gone before. He makes his case, however, over and over again, in the headnotes that preface each poet, and gives the reader the wonderful sense that the whole of American poetry is a living organism that nurtures itself retroactively as well as through the normal flow of time. Lehman explains to the reader in the headnote to Anne Bradstreet's (the earliest poet featured in the volume) work, that John Berryman, 300 years later, "found it expedient to adopt her voice in his long poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953). 'I didn't like her work, but I loved her – I sort of fell in love with her,' he explained." You can sense Lehman's infectious excitement when he makes these sorts of time-bridging connections, and it is illuminating to see how certain poets can, and have, fallen in and out of the public eye, thanks to their fellow poets. Both William Cullen Bryant's relative contemporary Matthew Arnold and our contemporary, Richard Wilbur, are given space to comment on Bryant's poem "To a Waterfowl," in Lehman's headnote, and Donald Hall and Louise Bogan comment on Thayer's "Casey at the Bat," and Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, respectively. This is where Lehman – with his great knowledge of the history of American poetry and the connections, through secondary, critical writings, that exist between American poets of all ages – shines, and also what makes the book so compulsively readable. That, and of course the discovery of poets that one hasn't heard of, or unknown poems by more well-known poets, and the pleasure of reading poets – Charles Bukowski, Bob Dylan, Edwin Denby, Bessie Smith – that are known in other areas of popular culture and other arts besides poetry, but rarely if ever accepted into the canon of American Poetry.

To a Waterfowl

WHITHER, midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?

Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,
As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along.

Seek'st thou the plashy brink
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed ocean-side?

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—
The desert and illimitable air—
Lone wandering, but not lost.

All day thy wings have fanned,
At that far height, the cold, thin atmosphere,
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,
Though the dark night is near.

And soon that toil shall end;
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

Thou 'rt gone, the abyss of heaven
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my heart
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,
And shall not soon depart.

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

William Cullen Bryant
1794–1878

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